

Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc.

Wisconsin State Council

Richard T. Nuske Memorial Scholarship 2024/2025

Applicant: Ashton James Steele

Interviewee: James Robert Steele

I had the pleasure to interview my grandfather, James "Jim" Steele, a veteran who served in the United States Air Force. As his memories unfolded, like pages from a history book, his journey into the military world began in 1967. During a time when the Vietnam War was at its peak his decision to join the Air Force was influenced by a conversation with his father, an Air Force pilot, and the looming draft. His father, my great grandfather, was a B17 pilot during World War II in the European Theater.

I asked Jim, "Can you share your experiences of joining the military and how you made the decision to serve?" Jim responded that he graduated from high school in 1965 and attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison but found himself on a different path due to academic struggles and new found freedoms. He had to leave school and was faced with the decision to go into the Army or Air Force, which he opted to a four-year commitment within the Air Force. Little did he know that this decision would lead him to experiences in missile silos and a world full of responsibility.

Basic training took Jim to San Antonio, Texas, and later to Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois, where he first underwent an aptitude test. His high test scores allowed him to enter the electronics field learning about the Minuteman missile, leading to his assignment at Whiteman Air Force Base. Jim and his fellow airmen were responsible for maintaining and repairing the formidable H Warhead Bomb, a crucial part of the United States deterrent force during the Vietnam War. The Hiroshima Bomb produced an explosion of 15,000 tons worth of TNT, whereas the H warhead was able to produce an explosion of 1.2 megatons. To put this into context, one megaton is equivalent to one million tons of TNT, meaning that the blast produced

by the H Warhead is eighty times larger than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Jim went on to tell of an incident in which one of his coworkers accidentally dropped a tool, tearing the outside of the missile coated with an ablative material. The government had to spend much-needed funds to replace the missile. This story highlights the responsibility of everyone involved in the Vietnam war. During these times we could not sacrifice a single area of the government, everything had to be above standard to protect the United States of America.

During his service, Jim achieved the rank of Staff Sergeant with four stripes, an accomplishment he achieved in under three years—an impressive feat. He spoke fondly of the support he received, even mentioning how his team moved furniture for him, considering it an added bonus. Becoming a "Master Team Chief" was one of his proudest achievements, as was the gravity of the responsibility of handling nuclear missiles.

The security clearance required for his role was the highest level, and background checks involved the government contacting his family and friends. Jim acknowledged the immense responsibility of being near something that could cause widespread destruction. The secrecy surrounding the work meant that even court records were examined during the background check process.

As we delved into his time on active duty, Jim shared some grim moments, which included watching the news and seeing the U.S. death count from the previous days. Jim frequently emphasized how much he wished he had fought with his family and friends in South Vietnam. Few people can truly comprehend the suffering he endured when he turned on the TV, not knowing whether it was someone he knew, and being unable to accompany them. Despite the

passing of many of the people he knew in his early career, Jim still writes Christmas letters to three of his buddies. He then commented that many servicemen didn't talk about their experiences, and while proud of his service, he acknowledged it was a very challenging time.

Jim bought the rights to a documentary "Primed for Defence" and uploaded it to YouTube. The video garnered over 102 thousand views and nearly 200 comments, with people sharing their own stories and expressing appreciation for the documentary. Like many others from that era, Jim's story shed light on the complexities and challenges faced by those who served during the Vietnam War. Hearing about the sacrifices veterans endured during this time period really showed me the importance of supporting our military.

I discovered so much after talking to my grandfather, as this opened a whole new aspect of his proud military service. This was really an eye-opening interview for me. It still is difficult for me to comprehend that only being two years older than I am today, he was able to physically touch something that had the potential to destroy my small rural town completely. I'm wondering now, after the interview, if my peers would behave and respond the same way our grandparents did in the event of another war. Following my interview with my grandfather, I believe that everyone my age needs to have a conversation with veterans of the Vietnam War to truly comprehend the sacrifices they made in order to ensure our safety and freedoms. I am proud to come from a long line of veterans, extending to all four of my great grandfathers serving in the military. I am thankful for this opportunity to learn from my grandfather and I will continue to show respect for all military servicemembers.